Shakespeare's Moonlight *Sonnetto*:

Medium as Message in the Age of Typography

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For the few centuries of that "Gutenberg Parenthesis" between the vocal performance of the Middle Ages and the computer facilitated communication of our times, the dominant medium by which prestigious verbal culture was transmitted over time and through space took the form of printed letters. Thanks to the visual mode of this media technology, reinforced by the stability of the text-as-artefact, such "literature" (as for a while it was known), had the option of supplementing the meaning or the aesthetic impact of the words in which it was expressed with exploitation of the typographical symbols by which they were represented. Familiar examples extend from the "Easter Wings" of seventeenth-century poet George Herbert, the typographical layout of the text reproducing the shape of its subject, to the "Mouse's Tale" in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* whose texts wanders and narrows on its way down the page in the form of a tail. The phenomenon will be illustrated here with a possible Shakespearean instance involving, appropriately, a parenthesis – indeed two.

Bracketed Lines

The last of Shakespeare's sonnets addressed to the Fair Youth, "O Thou my louely Boy" (No. 126; quotations will reproduce the spelling of the 1609 quarto), appropriately recapitulates a theme which was there at the beginning of the sequence and has been regularly evoked in the interim: the threat posed by Time to the youth's beauty. Technically it is not a sonnet as now understood, but what is sometimes called a *douzaine,* for rather than the usual fourteen lines encompassing three quatrains and a couplet of the (English) sonnet it has only twelve lines, comprised of six couplets. It will nonetheless be referred to as "sonnet 126" in what follows, for convenience and with the licence of Elizabethan usage, in which "sonnet", in the manner of the Italian *sonnetto,* could sometimes mean simply a short lyric (Booth 2000: 430). But as printed in the 1609 quarto, *Shakespeares Sonnets,* there are actually fourteen lines, as the

twelve lines of conventional text are followed by two lines of type, each of which however comprises only an empty parenthesis: that is, an opening round bracket, a line's worth of blank spaces, and a closing round bracket (Vendler 1997, facs.):

> O thou my louely Boy who in thy power,
> Doest hould times fickle glasse, his fickle, hower:
> Who hast by wayning growne, and therein shou'st,
> Thy louers withering, as thy sweet selfe grow'st.
> If Nature (soueraine misteres ouer wrack)
> As thou goest onwards still will plucke thee backe,
> She keepes thee to this purpose, that her skill,
> May time disgrace, and wretched mynuit kill.
> Yet feare her O thou minnion of her pleasure,
> She may detaine, but not still keepe her tresure
> Her *Audite* (though delayd) answer'd must be,
> And her *Quietus* is to render thee.
> *(* *)*
> *(* *).*

Their omission in some modern scholarly editions (Booth, 2000: 108 – although visible on the facing-page facsimile; Kerrigan 1986: 124; Blakemore Evans 1996: 95 and 1997: 1866) suggests that the editors concerned do not consider these parentheses part of Shakespeare's intentions . That they are both indented in the manner of the last two lines (the couplet) of all the sonnets in the quarto may indeed suggest that a printer or compositor (unaware that this was not a sonnet strictly speaking) believed that two lines had been lost (Booth, ed. 2000: 430; Kerrigan, ed. 1986: 350); alternatively it is also possible that an editor found it expedient to remove two lines of text which said something he felt they shouldn't, perhaps hinting at the identity of the "lovely boy" (Blakemore Evans, ed.: 241). But there has been a persistent counter-trend in criticism to consider the parentheses significant, and that it is Shakespeare who is doing the signifying (for some possibilities see Duncan Jones, ed., 2003: 366; Vendler 1997: 538). The matter will be pursued here under a watchword supplied by Charles Lock, in the course of a powerful appreciation of a parenthetical moment in a poem by Cowper: "it is

in and around and by means of parentheses that textual space is most made visible, made most to matter" (Lock 2003: 37).

In her sensitive and authoritative commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets, Helen Vendler has discerned that they each have a "couplet tie", a word which appears both in the quatrains (lines 1-12) and the concluding couplet (lines 13-14), and that identifying this word reveals a vital theme in the sonnet concerned. Of sonnet 126 she observes: "Couplet tie: None, since no couplet exists" (Vendler 1997: 538). But in their rather special way the last two lines *do* constitute a couplet, rhyming on ") ", and the two sets of brackets constitute a couplet tie with the quatrains, where there are also two bracketed parentheses: "(soueraine misteres ouer wrack)" in line 4 and "(though delayd)" in line 13. (These brackets too are sometimes omitted in standard modern editions [Duncan-Jones, ed. 2003: 367; Kerrigan, ed. 1986: 139.]) Quite in accordance with Vendler's thesis, this couplet tie identifies as an important theme in this sonnet everything that the opening and closing of brackets implies for the parenthetical, provisional nature of a given phase in the life of an individual (or of a given line of thought in discourse).

Bracket as Symbol: Sickle (and) Moon

A couplet tie of another kind may be asserted if we take the individual round bracket rather as a pictogram representing something else. In the first instance this could most plausibly be a sickle (reaping hook), giving a link to the "sickle" of l. 2. As the latter is more specifically "time[']s ... sickle", the tie now confirms that sonnet 126, and with it this sub-sequence as a whole, concludes as it began with a powerful reminder of Time's power over the youth and his beauty.

But in the context of the recent emergence of a calendrical approach to Shakespeare (e.g. see Wiles 1993; Sohmer 1999, 2002, and 2005),[1] it may be legitimate to go beyond the

immediate denotation of “sickle” as a harvest implement to its lunar connotations (as in the phrase “sickle moon”), reinforcing its tie to the brackets of the couplet, which of course strikingly resemble crescent moons. It is also relevant that these moon-like symbols occur in a sonnet which (in addition to “sickle”) invokes lunar imagery in its assertion that, paradoxically, the youth has “by *waning* growne” (l. 3; emphasis supplied): The passing of time (as registered by the moon’s phases) which debilitates most things, in his case seems rather to have enhanced his qualities (Booth 2000: 431; Kerrigan 1986: 63).

Against this background the lunar connotations of the parentheses echo the conclusion of the verbal part of the poem by emphasising that even this defiance of Time’s ravages cannot continue forever. The opening and closing round brackets, with their reverse shapes, reflect different moon phases, and in time the fair youth will be equally subject to such reversal.[2] But it seems not to have been previously remarked that the sequence of the symbols, determined by their typographical functions, juxtaposed with astronomical reality, also reproduces the paradox of “by waning grown”. The round bracket, “(“ , whose function in relation to the parenthesis is to open and begin (say with connotations of birth and youth), as a crescent actually corresponds to the last glimpse of the waning old moon, while the round bracket, “)” , which closes and so ends the parenthesis (say with connotations of age and death), as a crescent actually corresponds to the first glimpse of the waxing new moon (“crescent” in the original, etymologically correct, sense). So each line of the “couplet”, in beginning with the old moon and ending with the new moon, reproduces the lovely Boy's paradoxical treatment by Nature, who, “As thou goeth onwards still will plucke thee backe” (l. 6). And the paradox is further complicated by the observation that while a closing bracket corresponds to the crescent of a new moon, the latter is visible just after sundown, at the end of a day (and is itself setting), and conversely while an opening bracket corresponds to the

crescent of an old moon, the latter is visible just before sunrise, at the beginning of a day (and is itself rising). [3]

Dark Nights and the Dark Lady

It may also be feasible to approach the last lines of sonnet 126 from the other direction, and see these two parentheses (two sets of two brackets) as functioning not merely as the end of the Fair Youth sequence and the summation of its central themes, but also as the beginning of the Dark Lady sequence, which follows immediately with sonnet 127's, "In the ould age blacke was not counted faire", and the heralding of *its* themes. In the layout of this page in the 1609 quarto the two lines of parentheses occupy the gap which otherwise might have been expected between the two sub-sequences (for the layout of the page, sig. H3r, as a whole, with the last part of sonnet 125, sonnet 126 and its parentheses, and the opening of sonnet 127, see also the facsimile in Duncan-Jones, ed., 2003: 104.). And appropriately enough for a transition between an end and a beginning these interstitial lines begin with a bracket which represents the end of an old moon, and end with a bracket which represents the beginning of a new moon.[4] Looking forward, there is both a general appropriateness in having these changing moons introduce the sonnets on an evidently inconstant mistress, and a specific appropriateness in having this Dark Lady appear immediately after a closing bracket which as an evening crescent heralds the approach of darkness.

Furthermore in the course of these two parentheses a complete lunar cycle has come and gone, which we might link to Katherine Duncan Jones's striking suggestion (2003: 99) that the number of sonnets to and about the Dark Lady, 28, is a reference to the menstrual cycle: for the latter of course is linked, etymologically and in popular belief, to the moon's cycle. The subject and addressee of these 28 sonnets is certainly a woman whose lower body is very much in the poet's thoughts, and the number 28 is specifically signalled by the parentheses.

While technically a lunar month is on average 29.5 days, Elizabethans generally would undoubtedly have reckoned on 30. That is, there would have been thirty days between each new moon, traditionally defined as the first appearance of the waxing crescent. But each lunar month (as thus defined) ends with two days, between the last view of the waning crescent and that first view of the waxing crescent, when the moon is invisible. It is precisely these two moon-dark days, of two successive lunar cycles, which are represented by each of the two parentheses, or rather by the spaces between their brackets. Accordingly, in this "astronomical" interpretation of sonnet 126, before waning to the old moon which opens the second parenthesis (l. 13), the new moon which closes the first parenthesis (l. 14) shines for 28 days: these elapse between the end of line 13 and the beginning of line 14, the precise middle of the transition between the end of the Fair Youth sequence and the beginning of the Dark Lady sonnets.

Meaningful Typography

Whatever the validity of these particular explorations, Shakespeare's strategic position in relation to the opening of the Gutenberg parenthesis (Pettitt 2007) is enough to suggest that it is a legitimate critical procedure to take a long hard look at the letters and other typographical features of the material forms – the printed texts -- in which his verbal production reached the public. In the case of the 1609 *Sonnets* this would begin by noting the way the opening dedication "TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.THESE.INSVING.SONNETS ..." (Blakemore Evans 1997: 1843), in both spelling and typography, evidently seeks to resemble an inscription on a tomb – plausibly an anticipation of the poet's urgent assurance that the poems it contains will be a more enduring monument to the youth's beauty than "gilded monuments" (sonnet 55. ll. 1-2). The impact of the text also encompasses a manifestly deliberate decision not to follow the established convention of printing sonnets one to a page. With all pages

offering more than one sonnet, the continuity of the sequence is emphasized (as with the transition from the Fair Youth group to the Dark Lady group), while conversely the inner integrity of the many sonnets divided between adjacent pages is compromised in the reading experience (Hutchison 2006).

But the approach can also be extended to the invocation of typography within the world Shakespeare's works, which, at a time when both literacy and print were making themselves felt in a widening spectrum of cultural systems, are likely to reflect an acute alertness to the materiality of texts. It is accordingly altogether possible that the "dark lady" of the sonnets -- the source of his desires, satisfactions and frustrations, ultimately beyond his control and even interfering in his relationship with the fair youth -- is to be identified not merely with the mysterious Spanish, Jewish or Gypsy ladies proffered from time to time in biographical scholarship, but with the black ink in which the text is being written and will be printed (Felperin 1985).

And it might be hazarded, finally, that a typographical approach offers a solution to the celebrated puzzle of Hamlet's assurance to Rosencranz and Guildenstern that he is not really mad, for "When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw"(ed. Jenkins 1982: II.ii.374-75). As it stands a very modest achievement of mental health, commentators have accordingly sought to show either that a "hawk" is really some kind of tool, or a "handsaw" is really some kind of bird (Jenkins, ed. 1982: 473-74; Hulme 1962: 54-61). But this highly literate prince, who shortly before, when asked by Polonius what he is reading, specifies the medium, "Words, words, words" (II.ii.192), rather than the content, may mean his sanity is demonstrated by his unimpaired ability to distinguish, *by their appearance on the page*, between two words which actually do have quite a few letters in common. And the typographical difference between "a Hawke" and "a Handsaw" (in the First Folio spelling [ed. Bertram & Kliman 1991, TLN ll. 1425-26]), that is the letters they do not have in common,

proves to be k, e, a, n, d, s. It may be significant that they are an anagram of “danske”, which in the Danish of the time Shakespeare was writing could be taken to mean not merely “Danish”, but “Dane” (Dahlerup 1921), conferring on Hamlet’s cryptic remark some thematic interest in a play where calling oneself “the Dane” (I.ii.44; V.i.251) seems to be synonymous with claiming kingship. Sometimes, it seems, the medium is indeed the message.

NOTES

1. The present study was initiated and pursued independently, but is happy to acknowledge its anticipation in several respects by the discussion of this sonnet offered in the course Peter Jensen’s elaborate calendrical decoding of the sonnets, "Cracking the Code of Names & Time in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*” (http://cf.linnbenton.edu/artcom/english/jensenp/code/8CODE.htm, accessed 10-04-2010), ch. 7, pp. 6-7. Jensen discerns the lunar implications of the brackets, their connection with the parentheses in ll. 5 & 11 (without invoking Vendler's couplet tie), and their transitional function in relation to the two parts of the sequence. The discussion is disturbed however by his mistaking the astronomical equivalence of the opening and closing brackets respectively, asserting that “They look like the first and last phase of the Moon (with twenty-eight days in between)”: see further below. The link between the brackets, the crescent moon and the sickle is also noted by Burrow 2002: 633.
2. Katherine Duncan Jones (2003: 126), seems to credit Lennard (1991: 41-43) with the suggestion that “the round brackets ... image a repeated waxing and waning of the moon, pointing to fickleness and frailty”, but if so, erroneously, and, as we shall see, "repeated waxing and waning" technically misrepresents the order of the crescents. Lennart himself (1991: 43), while arguing forcefully that "the marks should not be

ignored", is more interested in the emptiness between the brackets, whose "silence" he relates to the *quietus* of l. 12 and the silence of the implied grave.

3. It may also be in place to report that sustained gazing at the text of sonnet 126 in the typography of the 1609 quarto also prompts the emergence of *full* moons, as represented by the capital O with which line 1 begins and another capital O in l. 9, together with the capital Q of *Quietus* in l. 12. Even more disturbingly, their location achieves complete lunar cycles with the waning and waxing crescent moons represented by the brackets of the parentheses in the first 12 lines of the sonnet, synchronized with the phases of the first line of the “couplet”: O ( ) O ( ) Q ( ).
4. A new moon which (continuing the typographical-astronomical speculations of the preceding note) duly reaches fullness in sonnet 127 with the capital O at the beginning of l. 2.

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